

Waikato Journal of Education
Te Hautaka Mātauranga o Waikato

Volume 16 Issue 3: 2011



“It’s about empowering the whānau”: Māori adult students succeeding at university

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Abstract

A large number of studies have demonstrated that Māori students are not performing well in education. The literature in the general area of Māori education paints a very grim picture that demonstrates a clear preoccupation with failure and underachievement. These studies often overlook the experiences of Māori adult students who return to study long after leaving school and experience considerable success. This paper focuses on the academic success of 16 indigenous students at a New Zealand university. It is based on the findings of a qualitative investigation that explored the experiences of Māori adult students who entered university with very few formal school qualifications and then went on to attain undergraduate degrees. This paper pays particular attention to the role of the whānau in facilitating Māori educational success at university.

Keywords

Māori academic success, higher education, whānau empowerment.

Introduction

The underrepresentation of indigenous students in mainstream universities is an international issue that is affecting many countries (Hunter & Schwab, 2003; Jackson, Smith, & Hill, 2003; Mendelson, 2006; Shield, 2004). Universities are under increasing pressure to improve the participation, persistence and success of indigenous students. Improving the performance of Māori students in tertiary education is important for individual students, for their whānau (extended family), hapū (sub-tribes) and iwi (tribes) and for New Zealand society in general. Earle (2007) claims, “there is clear evidence that holding a degree benefits Māori economically as well as having social and cultural benefits” (p. 3). The New Zealand Department of Labour (2009) identifies a number of benefits associated with success in higher education; these include



increased skill sets, improved career prospects, greater participation in the labour market, a lower risk of unemployment and redundancy and greater access to further training. It is vitally important that Māori students experience success in higher education so that they can access these benefits.

In recent years there have been improvements in Māori educational achievement. Educational statistics demonstrate that the percentage of Māori pupils leaving school with little or no formal attainment decreased from 25 percent in 2005 to 10.4 percent in 2008 (New Zealand Department of Labour, 2009). Over this same period, more Māori were achieving at the highest level of schooling (NCEA level 3 and above): this figure rose from 10.8 to 19.3 percent (New Zealand Department of Labour, 2009). In 2008, Māori were two-thirds more likely to successfully complete a tertiary level course than they were seven years earlier in 2001.

While it is evident that there has been some progress, a number of challenges still remain. Māori achievement rates continue to lag behind non-Māori. In 2008, 10.4 percent of Māori students left school with little or no formal attainment compared to 4.3 percent of non-Māori students. In fact, Earle (2008) points out that “Māori students have the lowest rate of progression from school to tertiary of any ethnic group” (p. 3). Not surprisingly then, Māori tend to enter tertiary study at an older age with fewer school qualifications.

In the New Zealand university context, adult students with little or no formal school qualifications enter university via special admission provisions. These provisions enable New Zealand or Australian citizens (or permanent residents of either country) to enrol at a New Zealand university without having to produce evidence of any academic qualifications (New Zealand Vice Chancellors’ Committee, 2010). This article reports some of the findings from a doctoral study that investigated the experiences of a group of 16 Māori students who entered university via special admission and went on to graduate with academic degrees. There are a number of ways that success can be defined. However, it should be noted that in the context of this paper, the participants were considered academically “successful” because they had completed all the requirements necessary to earn a bachelor’s degree from a New Zealand University.

The findings of this study suggest four major factors contributed to the success of the participants: *Whāia te iti kahurangi* (a strong determination to succeed), *Whanaungatanga* (strong social support networks with peers and faculty), *Te Ao Māori* (the Māori world) and *Whānau* (extended family) (Williams, 2010). However, this paper concentrates on only one of these aspects, the importance of the *whānau* (extended family).

Student success in higher education and the role of the family

Tinto’s (1993) *Theory of Student Departure* is the most frequently cited theoretical model in terms of student attrition and student retention in higher education (Braxton, 2000; Prebble et al., 2004; Scott & Smart, 2005). Tinto (1993) believes that in order to succeed at university, students must integrate themselves fully into the academic and social domains of university life. Drawing on Van Gennep’s (1960) ideas of separation, transition and incorporation, Tinto claims that the process of becoming integrated into the university must involve students separating themselves from home communities. Tinto (1993) argues that individuals must “disassociate themselves, in varying degrees, from membership in the communities of the past, most typically those associated with

the family, the local high school, and local areas of residence” (p. 95). Although Tinto realises that this may be difficult for individuals from non-traditional backgrounds and for those whose families have not attended college before, he still sees this as important. According to Tinto (1993) student departure results when the student is not able to fully integrate into the academic and social spheres of the university.

A number of critics have highlighted the problems of adopting integrative frameworks, such as Tinto's model, especially in regard to indigenous and minority students (Guiffrida, 2005; Johnson et al., 2007; Kuh & Love, 2000; Rendon, Jalomo, & Nora, 2000; Tierney, 2000). Some critics have gone as far as challenging the applicability of Tinto's notion of integration to any student who identifies with any non-dominant social background (Rendon et al., 2000; Johnson et al., 2007). They claim that Tinto's model is unfair because it places the blame for student departure on the shoulders of students themselves by focusing exclusively on social and academic integration as reasons for student withdrawal. This narrow focus does not take cognisance of institutional (systemic and structural) factors that may have an impact on student attrition (Guiffrida, 2005; Rendon et al., 2000). Another criticism of Tinto's theory is that it is a “one size fits all” or “universal” approach that does not take cultural diversity into account. For example, it does not take into account the difficulties that students from a minority, indigenous and/or collectivist background may have in terms of disassociating themselves from their home communities.

Retention and attrition in tertiary education is a popular area of study, especially in the United States (Scott & Smart, 2005; Walker, 2000). However, there is a paucity of literature and research in the New Zealand context (Prebble et al., 2004; Scott & Smart, 2005). Tinto's theory originated from the United States, and although it offers some very important insights, it is always wise to exercise caution when applying international constructs to localised situations. As Scott and Smart (2005) claim, “system-wide differences in the type of students, modes of learning, institutions and provision between countries will lessen the impact of some factors, and fail to recognise others when applied to the New Zealand context” (p. 5). However, Tinto's model and his central ideas do feature in several literature reviews undertaken here in New Zealand (see for example, Prebble et al., 2004). As mentioned previously, his theory is also very influential in the international context. It is for this reason that his ideas need to be carefully examined.

The Māori culture places a great deal of emphasis on the collective and on the role of the whānau (extended family). The whānau is often identified as a major support system for Māori (Durie, 1994; Mead, 2003; Metge, 1995; Pihama, 2001; G. Smith, 1995). Durie (1994) maintains that it is the whānau that is responsible for providing the physical, cultural and emotional well-being of an individual (Durie, 1994). He recognises that there is a strong emphasis placed on interdependence in the Māori community and the practice of whanaungatanga (maintaining kinship relationships) (Durie, 1997). Whānau members are expected to contribute to the well-being of the collective. Therefore, being a member of a whānau can incur costs as well as benefits (Durie, 1997).

In 2003, Durie specified five primary functions of whānau: *manaakitia* (the capacity to care); *tohatohatia* (the capacity to share); *pūpuri taonga* (the capacity for guardianship); *whakamana* (the capacity to empower); *whakatakoto tikanga* (the capacity to plan ahead). Durie (2003) maintains that whānau well-being can be

measured by exploring their ability to provide care, nurturing and protection; show generosity and share resources as in the redistribution of wealth; act as wise trustees over customary land, cultural heritage sites and sites of special significance for the whānau and also provide access to Māori cultural heritage and language; empower individual members by advocating on their behalf and smoothing their transition into different domains in society (developing human capital); and, the ability to set long-term goals. Although Durie (2003) maintains that this is the basis for assessing the well-being of whānau, these aspects also comprise effective ways of supporting individual whānau members.

A number of studies have identified the pivotal role that the whānau (extended family) has on the lives of Māori students in tertiary education. The whānau has been identified as a barrier to the participation and performance of Māori students in tertiary education (Hunt, Morgan, & Teddy, 2001; Jefferies, 1997; Nikora, Levy, Henry, & Whangapirita, 2002; Somerville, 1999). However, it has also been highlighted as a crucial factor in the success of Māori participants in higher education (Selby, 1996; Simpson 1998, Tiakiwai, 2001). On one hand, whānau provided much needed financial and emotional support for those studying at the tertiary level. However, whānau commitments (such as tangihanga [funerals] or marae commitments) also meant that some Māori students were culturally bound to take time out from their studies and contribute from their own limited resources.

International research on indigenous and minority students in higher education also reinforces the idea that the family can act as both “hindrance” and “help” (Guillory & Wolverton, 2008; Phinney, Dennis, & Orsorio, 2006). Schwab (1996) states that “kinship obligations are often intense for indigenous people” (p. 14). He suggests that these commitments can impinge on study time, affect attendance, and impact a student’s concentration and focus. He also points to the frequency of funerals as having a serious impact on the attendance rates of indigenous students. Schwab (1996) further maintains that “many indigenous people participating in higher education must deal with the burden of increased expectations from family and community to a much greater degree than the majority of students” (p. 14). These expectations can undermine the success of indigenous students at university.

The study

Sixteen participants were included in this study, 14 female and two male. All participants self-identified as Māori, had entered the university through special admission and had gained an undergraduate degree from a New Zealand university. The participants ranged in age from 23 years (born in 1981) to 56 years (born in 1949) when they were first interviewed.

A qualitative methodology was used (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2000). In-depth, semi-structured interviews comprised the major form of data collection. The participants were interviewed three times and key themes from round one and two were fed back to participants.

The study was underpinned by a Kaupapa Māori theoretical framework. This framework took for granted the validity and legitimacy of the values, beliefs and preferred practices of Te Ao Māori (the Māori world, including a Māori world view),

the importance of Māori language and culture and the struggle for Māori autonomy over their own cultural well-being (G. Smith, 1992).

The significance of whānau

The whānau was identified as a major theme and a contributing factor to the success of the 16 Māori special admission students in this study. The participants spoke openly about whānau members who shaped their early upbringing. The whānau were also influential in the participants' lives while they were studying at university.

Whānau provide the motivation

Phinney, Dennis and Orsorio (2006) claim that student motivations for attending university can be influenced by cultural values. Māori culture was described earlier as a collectivist culture that placed a great deal of emphasis on interdependence. These traditional attitudes and values were manifest in the participants' narratives.

The participants possessed a very strong determination to succeed. This determination was often underpinned by a strong sense of collective purpose, to provide a better life for their whānau. Twelve of the 16 participants in this study were parents. Many chose to enrol at university and in teacher education in particular because they believed that this would be a positive step forward for their families. The following statement was typical:

I am a single Māori mother that thought I couldn't do anything else besides look after my children, it took me a few years but I'm here now [at university] and I'm going to make a change, make life better for my kids. Not so much in values and beliefs and who I am, [but] probably financially and academically, knowing at the end of this I will be able to help prepare my daughter for the global world, because I have a better understanding of the education system, that I could guide my daughter. (Aroha)

In addition to financial rewards and economic security, several participants believed that the knowledge that they gained at university would help them support their own children's schooling. The importance of becoming role models in the whānau was also mentioned by participants. Some felt that it was their responsibility to act as positive role models for their children and for the wider whānau. They decided to go to university in the hope that their children and other whānau members might emulate this example:

Yeah, role model for them, provide first, make a better life for my two kids and then make them see Mum did it, we're all right, we're gonna do it. Give them a bit more in every way, financial, education, because I wasn't an education bunny so it's like, my kids will fall that way if I stay that way, so I'm going to do something absolutely crazy [and enrol at university]. (Mihi)

In many cases, the participants' reasons for pursuing a university education and persisting even in times of difficulty were about whānau empowerment. These findings are consistent with international research that shows that student persistence at

university often means that indigenous students are moving a step closer to making a better life for their families (Guillory & Wolverton, 2008).

For some participants who had older children, their decision to return to study had already produced positive benefits. They contended that some whānau members were choosing to stay at school longer while others were enrolling at university because they had witnessed them complete their degrees. This was highlighted as one of the major benefits of their university education:

Our nieces and nephews I think are actually quite proud of us and they see us standing as role models for our whānau. “Gee Aunty, if you can do that, I can do that” ... Quite a few of my nephews and nieces are staying at school a bit longer ... (Aroha)

Yeah, they [mature Māori students] know that if they change it for themselves, it will change for their kids and that’s what happened when I went to Uni, after my first year the kids go “Cher Mum, you passed” you know, and then my next daughter went [to university], and my next daughter went. (Wai)

Whānau provide encouragement

Many of the participants were exposed to tertiary education models within their whānau. Nine of the 16 participants identified whānau members who had engaged in some form of tertiary education. Eight participants reported receiving direct encouragement from whānau members to enrol at university. In most cases, the people who provided encouragement were whānau members who had already been to university or were currently enrolled:

I came for a joke ... I was at Kōhanga and my sister said why don’t you go to uni and I said only brainy people go there because I didn’t know you could get in on your age [special admission] because I didn’t have UE [university entrance] or anything and she said “you can still go” and I said “whatever” and it was a dare at first because [her best mates were working there] ... and she said “it’s all good, all my mates are there, just go” ... then [the university] rang and said “you’ve got an interview” and that’s when I started to freak out and I thought “I’ve got an interview” ... but it was originally a joke, a dare. (Rere)

However, not all of the reactions and comments the participants received from whānau were positive. Several participants received negative feedback from some of their whānau members when they informed them they were going to university. These comments made them even more determined to succeed:

Coming in as a mature student, one barrier I came across was my [extended] whānau. Not my immediate whānau. They’d say—what are you going to Uni for—you’ve got a good job, enough for you and your son to live on. And I said to them, I’m not just going there for myself, I’m not going there for an individual journey to develop myself—I’m going away for my iwi [tribe]—think about that ... I said look, you are comfortable where you are, I’m not, I need to find mātauranga ano [more education]. A lot of them said to me, you won’t finish, Ruita, you

won't finish but I said, give you a bet I'm going to finish, I remember saying that to one of my cousins—you watch me, I'll finish. But if you do finish you're not going to come home—you watch me, the day I finish, is the day I'll come home. (Ruita)

The determination to pursue education on behalf of the collective is once again demonstrated in this statement. For Ruita, going to university was not solely about individual gain; it had to do with whānau and iwi (tribal) development as well. Research has suggested that indigenous students often undertake studies that will enable them to give back to their communities (Guillory & Wolverton, 2008; Schwab, 1996). Schwab (1996) suggests that indigenous students “tend to do studies ‘for their people’ in fields such as education, nursing or aboriginal studies. The knowledge gained in these programs is more easily recognised as having a cultural value” (p. 18). This knowledge can also be utilised to empower the collective. Ruita clearly had these goals in mind when she opted to enrol at university to become a teacher. After attaining a Bachelor of Teaching degree, Ruita did return to her tribal area and is currently working in a local Kura Kaupapa Māori. In this sense she continues to “give back” to her iwi (tribe).

Whānau provide ongoing support

Thirteen participants talked directly about the support they received from whānau members while they were studying. The participants identified a range of whānau members (aunts, siblings, parents, cousins, spouses, and children) who were tertiary education models. It was these whānau members that assisted some participants with their transition into university. Participants drew on their whānau networks to help them become academically successful. A good example of this was the advice Manaaki received from his wife:

My wife told me, she said, you don't have to be brainy—you've just got to work hard and she gave me all this advice. On my first day she packed me a lunch—I felt like a kid. She gave me all the advice—always sit up the front, I've got a notebook for you, write down all the dates of your assignments. Why do I have to? Because you're useless at remembering things ... If you sit at the back you get too distracted because you can see everything. If you sit at the front you can just see the lecturer. Another piece of advice she gave me was always do your readings because when you go to the lecture you are not writing everything down—you are just sitting there going—oh yeah—just writing little notes, that's the structure of uni life. You don't have to be brainy, you don't have to be a brain box, it's just common sense really—you just got to know how they operate. (Manaaki)

Durie (2003) posits that one of the key capacities of the whānau is to empower (whakamana) other whānau members. He believes that instead of leaving individuals to their own devices, whānau members can help to facilitate their transition into new environments. The example above illustrates the way that whānau can help other whānau members broker entry into unfamiliar domains such as the university. In this example, Manaaki's wife provides clear systems advice and direct guidance and in doing this she helps to negotiate her husband's entry into the university.

This example is also a clear expression of whanaungatanga. Durie (1997) identifies that one of the benefits of whanaungatanga is being able to draw on collective resources, in this case, knowledge. As Rangihau (1992) notes, “we [Māori] give the talents we have so everybody can share in these sorts of experiences” (p. 184).

In addition to providing academic support, whānau also contributed financial and physical resources to support some participants while they were at university. One participant talked about her mother putting money into her bank account on a weekly basis so that she could survive at university. Another participant talked about the food packages that his parents sent. In another example, Huhana explained:

My sisters were always ringing up, my brothers, how you doing sis? My uncle rings up—do you need some firewood, my sister comes down from Auckland, we’ve just about run out of food, she would bring a whole box of kai [food]—put it in my freezer or fridge. So I think if I didn’t have that, it would have been so much worse. It has been a struggle but it would have been worse, I don’t know if I would’ve completed it. But I think in terms of being successful my whānau helped me at every turn. (Huhana)

The cost of higher education has been identified as a barrier to Māori participation in tertiary education (Jefferies, 1997; Nikora et al., 2002). The findings in this study demonstrated that some participants did indeed struggle financially while they were studying. In several cases, the generosity of their whānau made it possible for them to keep pursuing the goal of attaining an academic degree. In this sense, the participants’ whānau demonstrated the capacity to share (tohatohatia) (Durie, 2003).

Another of Durie’s (2003) capacities, the capacity to care (manaakitia) was also evident. Whānau members dedicated time to assist with childcare and performed extra duties around the home so that the participants had more time to focus on their studies.

Whānau roles and responsibilities can hinder success

Although the whānau provided a great deal of support, they also presented challenges for some participants. Enrolling at university and studying full time meant that the participants needed to make sacrifices. One of the sacrifices to be highlighted by participants (especially by those who were parents) was the time they spent with their children. Several felt that their children had “missed out” because they were attending university. A few participants appeared to feel some guilt over the time that they missed with their children:

For three years, my time at university, my children have missed out on a lot, let’s not kid ourselves. When we are studying full time, we are studying full time, full time means full time, weekends. I tried to make it so it was balanced, but who knows what balanced is—you know. Sometimes I guess when the pressure was on I was more likely to get into work and when it was off, it was like, can I just lie down here for a while and catch up on my sleep. (Huhana)

Parents in particular talked about the need to organise their family life around their university study. The participants put strategies in place so that their study would not interrupt the family routine. They demonstrated a commitment to putting their children and whānau first:

... you hear all the stories about uni students who suddenly haven't got a family and uni is the be all and end all. I had too many kids [10 children] for me to allow that to happen in our household so initially it seemed like I kept my nose in my books and ran out of time for the family and my husband commented once, he only had to comment on it once and I thought "change", which is when I moved to early morning ... That's when I would be sitting up there [university] at four am in the morning. I thought "no they're [her children] all asleep I can go now" and basically they're [her children] awake for one and a half hours in the morning before they're out the door but I'm here [at home] 100% after 3pm into the evening.... (Wai)

In a collectivist culture, maintaining whānau relationships and responsibilities is culturally expected. Some participants found it particularly difficult to balance family and study commitments because of the strong collective emphasis inherent within Māori culture:

The hardest thing for me was pleasing my whānau, they were so used to me being able to do a lot of things and I always found it hard to say "no" and I did it and a lot of my schoolwork suffered because I did it. Whānau pressures [they are] a lot of it ... just part of my life anyway, who I am and what my life was all about and I had to deal with it eventually. It made my schoolwork harder but I dealt with it, I had to deal with it and I learnt to say "no". (Aroha)

Tinto (1993) states that adult students in particular can find it difficult to balance external commitments (such as family and work) with university study. In terms of indigenous adult students, family commitments can be even more intense. This is supported by Jefferies (1997), who maintains that it can be particularly difficult for Māori students to balance family and study commitments because of the strong collective whānau orientation that exists in Māori culture. The expectation that whānau members will contribute to whānau well-being and participate in whānau activities, regardless of whether or not they were studying at university, did put a lot of pressure on several participants and in some cases impeded their success at university.

The whānau as a contributing factor influencing academic success

The participants' narratives strongly support claims that the whānau structure continues to operate as a prime support that shapes the identity and well-being of many people within contemporary Māori society (Durie, 2003; Mead, 2003; Metge, 1995; Pihama, 2001; G. Smith, 1995). The Māori special admission students in this study were empowered by their whānau to pursue a higher education. Whānau provided inspiration, motivation and encouragement. They also bestowed academic guidance, offered emotional support, contributed financial resources and dedicated time to support the participants while they were studying. This provides some evidence to challenge Tinto's (1993) claim that students must disassociate from their home communities (particularly, family and peers) in order to succeed at university. For some of the participants in this study, whānau support was absolutely critical to their participation, persistence and eventual success.

However, balancing whānau obligations and commitments with university study was a real challenge for some participants. It was difficult to separate their “home lives” from their “university life.” In some cases, this impeded their ability to succeed in higher education. Overall, the results of this study validate the findings of previous studies that show that the whānau can be both a strong support and a barrier for indigenous and minority students in higher education (Guillory & Wolverton, 2008; Hunt et al., 2001; Jefferies, 1997).

The findings of this research demonstrate that whānau empowerment was a clear goal for many of the Māori adult students in this study and one of the major reasons they chose to pursue university education. In the current economic and political climate, there are fears that the numbers of students accessing university through special admission will be curtailed. Restricted entry as a result of tertiary education funding reforms has meant that priority for entry into university now goes to school-leavers. This has serious implications for Māori students, most of whom enter university at an older age. Universities have an obligation to ensure Māori and other underrepresented groups are able to access university education.

*He kōpū puta tahi, he taura whiri tātou;
whiringa a nuku, whiringa a rangi, te whatia e.*

*Issue of one womb, we are a rope woven of many strands;
woven on earth, woven in heaven, it will not break.
(Māori Marsden cited in Metge, 1995, p. 79)*

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